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***“Do it yourself”  
Immigrants’ Integration to Polish Society***

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## ***“Do it yourself” Immigrants’ Integration to Polish Society***

### 1. Introduction

Although in Poland immigration is low in numbers in comparison to the numbers in the EU-15, Poland has been gradually changing from the sending country to transit and immigration country since 1989. It experienced massive short-term mobility of citizens of former USSR, labour migration both from the East and the West and formation of new immigrant communities, permanent immigration, and returns of Poles from abroad.

In this paper I will refer to two main categories of immigrants to Poland: labour/economic immigrants and persons in need of international protection. More specifically I will present three ethnic groups: Ukrainians, Vietnamese and Chechens. The first group is the most numerous. The second and the third ones represent a very exotic culture for Polish society. But first I will turn to the term *integration*. Integration means adopting receiving society's values and norms and maintenance of ethnic ones. Immigrant becomes an integral part of a larger societal framework, simultaneously keeping the sense of belonging to an ethnic group.<sup>1</sup> Integration refers also to growing institutional participation and is not one-dimensional process. Today it is commonly understood that integration into one sphere need not display an equal degree of integration into another sphere.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Integration to Polish Society

Since 1989, Polish society has been in the process of economic and political transition. The incorporation of immigrants into changing society may be easier than their incorporation into more static societies. But it is also well known that the more homogeneous the society, the more difficult it is to create open and friendly attitudes towards strangers and Poland, as a consequence of the Second World War, is ethnically almost homogeneous country.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Berry, *Acculturation: A comparative analysis of alternative forms*, in: R.j.Samuda&S.L.Woods (eds.), “Perspectives in immigrant and minority education”, New York, University Press of America, 1983, pp.9-25.

<sup>2</sup> See the report prepared for the European Commission by Han Entzinger and Renke Biezeveld, *Benchmarking in Immigrant Integration*, Rotterdam, August 2003, pp.8,9.

<sup>3</sup> Krystyna Iglicka and Marek Okolski, *A Central European Perspective* in: “Managing Integration: The European Union's responsibilities towards Immigrants”, Rita Susmuth and Werner Weidenfeld, editors, 2005, pp.172-180.

Regarding the first category of immigrants - labour/economic immigrants - we can distinguish two subcategories: a. legally employed foreigners or foreign entrepreneurs, b. irregular workers, who predominate in Poland.

Due to small numbers of immigrants who are legally employed or running their own businesses, they are not a group that receives any attention of the state in terms of integration to the Polish society. Also reunified family members and Polish citizens' spouses are not covered with any specific integration measures. The registered foreign workers come mostly from the Western European countries and the US. They are in majority skilled or highly-skilled.<sup>4</sup>

Considering migration of managers or highly-qualified specialists, mainly from the West, it is difficult to talk about integration. The first question is whether they adapt to the hosting society or whether they are a part of corporation culture. Their stay in Poland is temporary from the beginning. Their social contacts are mainly limited to their working environment. I would rather stay on the position that in this case there are no incentives for integration to Polish culture or society.<sup>5</sup>

Other economic migrants who want to settle legally in Poland try to integrate with Polish society without state support. They rely on themselves. The final step for them is naturalization. Migrants coming from former USSR countries, especially Ukraine, are an example of such an integration process. According to the data of the Office for Repatriation and Aliens there were 16,5 thousands Ukrainian citizens legally residing in Poland (residing on the basis of temporary residence permits and settlement permits, September 2004). In 2005, the settlement permits were granted to 1 518 of Ukrainian citizens, which is 42.3% of all granted permits, and temporary residence permits were granted to 8 304, which is 37% of all granted permits. In last years Polish citizenship was granted primarily to the nationals of Ukraine (e.g. in 2003 – 426 Ukrainians and the total number of foreigners granted in 2003 with the Polish citizenship was 1471).<sup>6</sup> However we should realize that some foreigners treat Poland only as a transit stop on their way westward. Polish citizenship is treated as a tool facilitating further migration.

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<sup>4</sup> See Agnieszka Szwader, *Migracje menadżerskie*, in: Maciej Zabek (ed), „Miedzy pieklem a rajem. Problemy adaptacji kulturowej uchodźców i imigrantów w Polsce”, Warszawa, 2002, pp.183-200.

<sup>5</sup> In 2004, 13 179 work permits were granted to foreigners in Poland. The 33 per cent decrease in comparison to the previous year was recorded due to Poland's accession to the EU (on May 1, 2004). Detailed data on work permits can be found in SOPEMI reports: <http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/index.php/Publications/Wp>

<sup>6</sup> Krystyna Iglicka, *The Impact of the EU Enlargement on Migratory Movements in Poland*, p.17 [http://www.csm.org.pl/en/files/raports/2005/rap\\_i\\_an\\_1205a.pdf](http://www.csm.org.pl/en/files/raports/2005/rap_i_an_1205a.pdf)

Seasonal workers and circular/shuttle migrants constitute the majority of irregular immigrants.<sup>7</sup> They are mainly Ukrainian citizens. Short geographical and cultural distances, easy access to tourist visa (till October 2003 Ukrainians benefited from non-visas entrance) encourage undertaking of this kind of migration. They do not perceive Poland as a place suitable for longer stay or settlement. Their social contacts with Poles, that could create opportunity for integration, are rather limited by their main aim - accumulating money and returning home. Their irregular status is another factor restraining their integration process - it is rather disputable whether they would be interested in any integration programs. This question could refer to all seasonal workers, not only those illegally employed. Public activities addressed to this subcategory of immigrants defiantly should concentrate on providing information regarding the Polish labour law regulations and working conditions.

A group of economic immigrants that is easily noticed in the Polish homogenous society are Vietnamese. They form a new immigrant group, and the only one which creates some kind of ethnic enclave. Their inflow to Poland in the 1990s is related to social networks existing between Poles and the Vietnamese developed yet in the 1970s and the 1980s. Vietnamese students and those who after graduating Universities decided to run their small enterprises in Poland were joined by others. Gradually, the circle of the Vietnamese coming to Poland enlarged. According to the data of the Office for Repatriation and Aliens there are 4, 5 thousands Vietnamese citizens legally residing in Poland (residing on the basis of temporary residence permits and settlement permits, September 2004). The number of the Vietnamese immigrants is estimated to be a maximum of 50 thousands. Immigrant community leaders claim that there are no more than 20 thousands.

Vietnamese immigrants are ethnically homogeneous group, however their educational and language skills can be different. The first wave of the Vietnamese knows Polish language and culture and is well integrated to the Polish society. They usually, have Polish citizenship or permission for settlement. The second wave is not so well-educated. They learn the twists of life in Poland while working and from their colleagues, who have stayed in Poland for longer time. They do not expect state support - they rely on ethnical networks and cultural capital.

It could be said that in practical dimension the Vietnamese are very well adapted to institutional system – they know how to act to reach their aim – economic prosperity. They also succeeded in informal relationships. They are an element of landscape at the Polish

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<sup>7</sup> According to the estimation of the Office for Repatriation and Aliens in 2004 there were about 450 000 foreigners working without necessary permit.

open markets. Vietnamese fast-food restaurant mushroomed in the whole country. The Vietnamese community in Poland does not provoke social dismay. On the other hand one must realized that Polish authorities perceive a big number of Vietnamese with irregular status as a problem. Many of them come to Poland as tourists but remain there to work illegally.<sup>8</sup>

There are two associations of the Vietnamese in Poland: "Socio-Cultural Association of Vietnamese in Poland" and "Solidarity and Friendship", which issues a magazine. They both aim to organize migrants, provide ties with Vietnamese culture and tradition. They also create positive image of Vietnamese in Poland. The Vietnamese in Poland can be described as a group with a high level of cooperation and self-organization. The majority of conflicts are resolved within the ethnic group. They tend to live in Vietnamese neighbourhood, they respect their culture values. They have ethnic clubs, sport competitions, Taxi Corporation, even a beauty contest. There is also Catholic Pastorate of the Vietnamese. It could be concluded that expectation of economic success and economic success itself are factors leading to integration. Simultaneously, the Vietnamese remain the basic values of their own society and adapt to the basic values of the host Polish society.

Currently, the only foreigners participating in integration programs in Poland are refugees. However, in 2007 also those, who are granted a tolerated status (a complementary form of protection), will be beneficiaries of integration programs. This selective character of approach taken to integration is characteristic for most countries in Central Europe. As a rule the criteria of small scale and low cost are applied.<sup>9</sup> Peculiarity of the Polish situation consists in nationality of asylum seekers - since 2000 – after the beginning of the war in Chechnya Russian citizens of Chechen origin have dominated the flow. They constitute approximately 90 % of applicants for refugee status.<sup>10</sup> Majority of them is granted with tolerated stay. In 2005, 6 244 of 6 860 persons applying for refugee status were Chechens. 335 persons were granted a refuge status and 1 822 a tolerated stay.<sup>11</sup>

Refugees and persons with the tolerated status gain access to Polish Social Assistance on the same basis as Polish citizens. They receive the same benefits as Poles. They obtain:

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<sup>8</sup> Teresa Halik, Ewa Nowicka, *Wietnamczycy w Polsce. Integracja czy izolacja? (The Vietnamese in Poland. Integration or Isolation?)*, Warszawa, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Krystyna Iglicka and Marek Okolski, *A Central European Perspective* in: "Managing Integration: The European Union's responsibilities towards Immigrants", Rita Susmuth and Werner Weidenfeld, editors, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Krystyna Iglicka, *The Impact of the EU Enlargement on Migratory Movements in Poland*, 2005, [www.csm.org.pl](http://www.csm.org.pl), pp.13-15.

<sup>11</sup> In practical terms it could be said that almost none of Chechens was left without any form of international protection. Their majority received tolerated stay, however, a part of them applied for refuge status once again,

right to work without work permit, access to social aid and family benefits, right to state (free of charge) education on the primary and secondary level. However, persons with the tolerated stay do not receive Geneva travel document and do not participate in the individual integration programs.

These integration programs are realized on the local level (county). They are elaborated individually by each recipient with the assistance of a social worker from the family assistance center. They include: participation in Polish language course, which is obligatory for a beneficiary, assistance in finding accommodation and assistance in registration at the labour office. The final aim of these one-year programs is to find employment. Unfortunately, although there is still no official evaluation, we can observe that the programs are not effective. It is extremely difficult to conduct a successful program with a limited staff <sup>12</sup> so few refugees are practically adapted to Polish reality. They depend on Social Assistance and charity organizations. But it should be stressed that in current economic situation there are also many Poles, who are not adapted to the changing reality and who are marginalized or are on the way to marginalisation. Refugees and persons who are granted tolerated status are also in danger of marginalisation.

Permanent employment and reasonable salaries or economic prosperity, in general terms, are important factors leading not only to immigrants' integration but also to citizens' full participation in the society. Poland is not perceived as a destination country by majority of refugees not because of the lack of regulations or hostile attitudes. They have the same rights as Polish citizens but they also face the same problems:

- lack of social housing,
- scarce financial resources for social benefits,
- difficulties accessing specialized medical service.

These are discouraging factors for undertaking integration effort. Especially, for those who suffer from health and psychological problems caused by their experience which lead them to obtain international protection; those who do not know the rules of Western liberal democracy, who do not possess interpersonal skills so important in contemporary world.

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which explain the discrepancy in numbers mentioned above.

[http://www.unhcr.pl/aktualnosci.php?news=323&wid=61&current\\_section=statystyki](http://www.unhcr.pl/aktualnosci.php?news=323&wid=61&current_section=statystyki)

<sup>12</sup> In Warsaw for example there are about two social workers working with about 100 refugees

### 3. Conclusion

As a conclusion, integration to the host society is crucial both for immigrants and for the receiving society. It is the way to decrease ethnic tensions and conflicts. Thanks to integration both members of receiving community and immigrants are less prone to give in to extremist influences. In the Polish case economic migrants who rely on themselves without support of state integration programs integrate to the host society. Refugees who integrate to the Polish society are exceptions, although they benefit from integration program. Expectation of economic success is a factor leading to integration. Refugees and those with tolerated status miss that incentive.

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SOPEMI reports: <http://www.migracje.uw.edu.pl/index.php/Publications/Wp>

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